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How to study the populist radical right and the welfare state?

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ABSTRACT

This review article and special issue introduction argues that studying the relationship between the populist radical right and the welfare state requires bridging literatures that have so far advanced with little mutual engagement: party politics and voting behaviour research on the one hand, and comparative political economy and welfare state research on the other. In this way, the article highlights the advantages of connecting different academic sub-fields in studying radical right politics. First, the literature of comparative political economy on the multi-dimensionality of welfare politics can contribute to a clearer understanding of both the welfare-related causes and consequences of radical right support. Second, the party politics literature on the radical right's ideology provides theoretical tools to explain the welfare-related consequences of populist radical right parties. The article illustrates the advantages of bridging these literatures through the empirical contributions in this special issue and concludes with avenues of future research.

The relationship between political parties and the welfare state has been the subject of vibrant debate in comparative politics and political economy across the post-war era. Studying the question of how and why ‘parties matter’ goes back to the classical partisan theory advanced by Hibbs (1977), Castles (1982), and Schmidt (1996) that the political left represents the material interests of lower income groups whereas the political right those of higher income groups. In this ‘industrial’ view, the origins of the welfare state depended in large part on types and degrees of labour power (Korpi 2006). However, a more recent wave of scholarship on the ‘post-industrial’ era has called into question the traditional left-right distinction by highlighting fundamentally changing (and increasingly complex) patterns of voting behaviour, cleavage structures, party competition contexts, and party-voter linkages (Beramendi *et al.* 2015; Häusermann *et al.* 2013).

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An important reason why the relationship between political parties and the welfare state has become much more complicated is the rise of populist radical right parties (PRRPs), i.e. a party family that is characterised by an ideology of nativism, authoritarianism and populism (Mudde 2007).¹ Looking at 23 European countries, the average vote share of this party family increased from 2 percent in 1990 to 17.5 percent in 2019 (Parlgov database, cf. Döring and Manow 2020).² PRRPs are thus widely considered the most successful new party family in the past roughly three decades. While these parties might have downplayed the socio-economic dimension in an effort of ‘position-blurring’ in the past (Rovny 2013), this appears no longer feasible, given their growing electoral strength and political influence in a context of de-industrialisation and globalisation in tandem with the fallouts from the Great Recession (post-2008) and the Covid-19 pandemic (since 2020).

In this special issue, we therefore address two overarching questions: How do PRRPs shape the welfare state? And how does the welfare state itself shape the electoral fortunes of PRRPs? In doing so, we build on and contribute to the literatures of (1) party politics and voting behaviour on the one hand, and (2) comparative political economy and welfare state research on the other. Broadly speaking, the relationship between the radical right and the welfare state has not figured very prominently in both lines of research. The party politics and voting behaviour literature primarily focussed on the socio-cultural dimension (e.g. immigration control, law & order, crime) when explaining the emergence or positions of the radical right, while placing much less emphasis on the intersection between welfare state institutions and the populist radical right (Golder 2016; Mudde 2019). By contrast, comparative political economy and welfare state research has traditionally been more concerned with the socio-economic dimension, but it focussed more on mainstream parties of the left and right (Beramendi *et al.* 2015; Häusermann *et al.* 2013). Our primary goal in this special issue is to bring these different perspectives together in order to advance our understanding of the relationship between the radical right and the welfare state. In doing so, we highlight recent innovations in both literatures and draw on the contributions to this special issue.

Mutual neglect: classical perspectives in party politics and welfare state research

The classical perspectives in party politics and voting behaviour research on the one hand, and comparative political economy and welfare state research on the other, have mutually neglected each other in assessing

the association between PRRPs and the welfare state. Broadly speaking, the welfare state literature has long been concerned with the connection between party politics and social policy making, but in doing so, has mainly focussed on mainstream parties of the left and right in government, while neglecting the emergent PRRPs as a potentially special case. In fact, it is probably fair to say that comparative welfare state research has been particularly keen on exploring the role of the left for welfare state development (Korpi 1983; Stephens 1979; more recently, Kenworthy 2019), while only gradually paying more attention to the role of Christian democratic (Van Kersbergen 1995), mainstream conservative (Jensen 2014) and, very recently, radical right (Afonso and Rennwald 2018) and green parties (Röth and Schwander 2021). Vice versa, the literature explaining the emergence of PRRPs has mainly looked at driving forces that are related to socio-cultural issues such as immigration, European integration and (opposition to) multiculturalism, whereas the welfare state played only a negligible role, even in accounts looking at the economic grievances of radical right voters (Golder 2016). In the following, we will briefly review these classical perspectives before we start to develop a more integrated perspective by drawing on recent innovations in the literature as well as the contributions to this special issue.

Welfare-related consequences of PRRPs: party politics and its impact on the welfare state

The roots of scholarship on the impact of party politics on the welfare state go back to power resource theory from the 1970s and early 1980s (Esping-Andersen 1985; Korpi 1983, 2006; Stephens 1979), which had been framed against the then dominant modernisation theory approach that explained the development of the welfare state primarily as a reaction to socio-economic and demographic problem pressures. Looking back from today, early contributions in the power resource tradition had a rather simplistic understanding of the link between party politics and the welfare state. The power resources of the ‘left’ (social democratic parties in government and parliament in combination with powerful trade unions in the labour market arena) largely determined the generosity of the welfare state, which was regarded as a policy instrument ‘against markets’ (Esping-Andersen 1985). The policy positions of different political parties were derived from the economic interests of their respective electoral constituencies, with left-wing parties representing the lower income classes and right-wing parties representing the upper income classes (Hibbs 1977). Thus, political parties acted as ‘transmission belts’ of the economic (and distributive) interests of their

electorate into the parliamentary arena and eventually into governmental policy making.

Over the past decade, a wealth of scholarship has emerged that has developed a much more fine-grained understanding of the complex relationship between party politics and the welfare state. For instance, the influential Varieties of Capitalism debate of the early 2000s (Hall and Soskice 2001; Iversen 2005) has forcefully argued that the relationship between the welfare state and markets is not necessarily a purely antagonistic one, as social policies can effectively contribute to and promote the formation of particular kinds of skills that in turn contribute to economic growth (see Iversen and Soskice 2019 for a recent update on this line of thought). The debate on the social investment welfare state model has also continued along these lines, emphasising that social investment policies focussing on the generation and maintenance of human capital as well as on the provision of sufficient ‘buffers’ can promote economic development, while also mitigating social inequalities (Esping-Andersen 2002; Hemerijck 2013, 2018; Morel *et al.* 2012; Plavgo and Hemerijck 2020). As social investment policies simultaneously address these different goals and as they are broadly popular, the ‘party politics’ of social investment cannot be easily matched to the traditional left-right scheme, but instead unfolds against the background of a more complex and multidimensional policy space (Garritzmman *et al.* 2018; Häusermann *et al.* 2015).

In line with this notion of the increasing complexity of the partisan politics of welfare state, research on individual attitudes and preferences towards the welfare state has also expanded its analytical focus on the driving forces of attitudes (see Svallfors 2012 for an overview of this research). As mentioned above, the pioneering work on the partisan politics of the welfare state has emphasised the centrality of economic, i.e. material interests of individuals as driving forces of party positions. Even though material self-interest (i.e. the economic position of individuals) has repeatedly been found to be a powerful predictor of attitudes (e.g. Finseraas 2009; Iversen and Soskice 2001; Rehm 2009 and many others), scholarship has discovered a range of additional factors that matter (and whose importance may even have increased over time, although there is little research on that specific aspect). For instance, norms and values also strongly influence the formation of attitudes and therefore also the vote choice of individual citizens (see e.g. research on the role of attitudes towards the determinants of economic success (‘luck vs. effort’) (Alesina and La Ferrara 2005), altruism and social solidarity (Goerres and Tepe 2010; Lupu and Pontusson 2011). A further strand of research of relevance here is scholarship on policy feedback, i.e. how existing policies and institutions shape attitudinal patterns (see Béland

and Schlager 2019; Busemeyer *et al.* 2021; Jacobs and Weaver 2015 for recent overviews). This kind of research therefore paints a more complex picture of how attitudes are formed and therefore how political parties derive their policy positions, if and when these are somehow related to the demands of their electoral constituencies.

In spite of these recent advances, as forcefully argued in a review article by Häusermann *et al.* (2013), much of comparative welfare state research retains a strong influence from the early work in power resource theory (see Busemeyer 2009 for a similar argument), neglecting some of the insights that research in the field of party politics has produced. For instance, the electoral constituencies of particular parties are regarded as rather fixed and static, whereas in fact there has been a lot of dynamic movement across the years, in particular for mainstream parties of the left (Gingrich and Häusermann 2015; Kitschelt 1999). The shift in the electoral support coalition of mainstream left parties (social democratic and socialist parties) from the traditional working class to the ‘educated’ middle classes has opened up space for PRRPs to appeal to (parts of) the (male) blue-collar working class (Norris and Inglehart 2019; Oesch and Rennwald 2018), as we further discuss below. Social democratic parties in government have adjusted their policy stances to appeal strategically to new potential constituencies in the middle classes, in particular among the so-called ‘socio-cultural professionals’ working in the public sector (i.e. the welfare state), by emphasising education and other social investment policies (Busemeyer 2009; Häusermann *et al.* 2013). Vice versa, mainstream right parties have also moved towards the centre to appeal to the ‘urban middle class’ (e.g. managers) by, for instance, promoting policies that improve the reconciliation of work and family life, even – and maybe even particularly – in conservative welfare states such as Germany (Morgan 2013).

In short, these examples show that comparative welfare state research increasingly pays attention to the role of electoral competition, moving beyond the simplistic depiction of political parties as transmission belts of the economic interests of their particular constituencies and instead developing a more complex understanding of political parties as strategic actors that also try to shape and influence both party competition as well as public opinion. Still (with few exceptions to be discussed below), it is fair to say that these debates largely focus on how mainstream parties of the left and right adapt to changing socio-economic and political circumstances.

Populist radical right parties have been much less at the centre of attention in comparative political economy and welfare state research. Partly, this might well be simply a reflection of data limitations. Regarding the measurement of welfare attitudes and preferences, the supporters of

PRRPs were relatively small minorities in a number of countries until recent years (while comparative data was much less available during their electoral breakthroughs in the 1990s), so that the number of observations of these individuals in comparative surveys of public opinion has been too small for quantitative analyses. Moreover, PRRP supporters used to be less inclined to reveal themselves in public opinion surveys compared to supporters of traditional parties. When it comes to actual policy making, the country cases and time periods in which PRRPs were in power have been very limited too (again until more recently). These practical considerations might help understand why comparative political economy and welfare state research has only recently started to study the association between PRRPs and social policy making (see below for more details).

Welfare-related causes of PRRPs: explaining the rise of the radical right

While the welfare-related consequences of PRRPs have so far played a relatively minor role in comparative political economy and welfare state research, party politics and voting behaviour research has also focussed less on the welfare-related causes of radical right support (cf. Arzheimer 2009; Golder 2016; for notable exceptions, see e.g. Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2016; Swank and Betz 2003; Vlandas and Halikiopoulou 2019). Broadly speaking, the recent debate on the demand-side factors behind the rise of PRRPs has mainly played out between the ‘cultural backlash’ versus ‘economic anxiety’ arguments (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2018). Whereas the former argues that voters support PRRPs in order to retain their national identity in the face of growing immigration rates (e.g. Norris and Inglehart 2019), the latter claims that they are concerned with deteriorating economic prospects caused by the neoliberal consensus in the political mainstream (e.g. Hopkin 2020).

Central to both lines of argumentation is the notion introduced by Kriesi *et al.* (2008) that globalisation has created ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ in economic as well as cultural ways. The ‘winners’ of globalisation are typically characterised by high levels of education, which often translates into liberal attitudes on cultural diversity as well as economic opportunities across nation state borders. By contrast, the ‘losers’ of globalisation feel threatened by growing immigration rates, intensified economic competition, and the declining relevance of the nation state alongside EU integration. It is the latter group of voters that typically constitutes the electoral reservoir of PRRPs (Häusermann and Kriesi 2015), but there has been a long and vibrant debate about whether the economic or

cultural forces of globalisation are more powerful in explaining the vote choice of the ‘losers’ of the globalisation.

Overall, the ‘cultural backlash’ hypothesis that the ‘losers’ of globalisation support PRRPs for identity-related reasons has received more empirical attention (and thus support) than the ‘economic anxiety’ hypothesis. The socio-cultural dimension has therefore been the main avenue of research on the vote choice for the radical right. In the words of Mudde and Kaltwasser (2018: 7), the ‘culture’ versus ‘economy’ question ‘has been debated, and we would argue that it was decided, decades ago (in favor of cultural backlash)’.

Notably, however, recent findings on the role of *social status* in voting behaviour research suggest that ‘cultural’ and ‘economic’ explanations are much more complementary than usually portrayed in academic debates. Gidron and Hall (2017) show how economic and cultural developments interact in shaping a ‘status anxiety’ that increases the likelihood of voting for the radical right, especially among a core group of working-class men (see also Gidron and Hall 2020). Carreras *et al.* (2019) find a similar dynamic in that long-term economic factors caused precisely those short-term anti-immigration attitudes that explain the ‘Leave’ vote in the Brexit referendum. Drawing on individual-level panel data, Kurer (2020) comes to a similar conclusion in that the *relative* decline in the social hierarchy makes (male) routine workers susceptible to the nativist platforms of PRRPs. This position is in line with Engler and Weisstanner (2021) who find that growing income inequality creates a fear of social decline among previously dominant political groups – individuals with high subjective social status and lower-middle incomes –, which have turned into an important electorate of PRRPs. What these studies suggest is that the *threat* of decline in social status, rather than actual outcomes of decline (e.g. unemployment, poverty), drives voters into the hands of PRRPs, as the latter offer voters the prospect of defending traditional social boundaries, especially between the native in-group and the immigrant out-group. These findings help understand why welfare chauvinism – i.e. selective cuts in social protection targeted at immigrants – is important to PRRPs, even though radical right voters do not gain material benefits from reduced welfare entitlements for others. But cuts for non-citizens may help to restore the relative social status of previously dominant political groups, typically the male, core workforce in manufacturing.

Despite this extensive decades-long debate in voting behaviour research, the role of social policy in mediating electoral support for PRRPs has received very little attention. Although the emerging literature on the role of social status is useful in understanding the ‘culturalisation’ of

socio-economic concerns among PRRP voters, we have a limited understanding of how the welfare state can mediate the perceived threat of social decline in ways that reduce the electoral success of PRRPs. To the best of our knowledge, the exceptions in this regard are Swank and Betz (2003) who show that the effect of globalisation on support for the radical right is contingent on welfare state generosity (see also Swank and Betz 2018), whereas Halikiopoulou and Vlandas (2016) and Vlandas and Halikiopoulou (2019) emphasise the institutional design of unemployment benefits and employment protection in mediating the impact of unemployment on far-right voting. Overall, this lack of attention is surprising given that such a research agenda would arguably have political relevance and real-world implications for policy making in light of the radical right's enduring attacks on human rights and liberal democracy. In fact, the welfare state and the labour market represent crucial policy tools available to policy-makers in addressing the status anxieties the above literature has identified as one of the root causes of radical right voting.

An emerging literature: recent contributions on the welfare-related consequences of PRRPs

The previous sections have demonstrated that the relationship between the radical right and the welfare state has not figured very prominently in comparative political economy and welfare state research on the one hand, and voting behaviour and party politics on the other. As we aim to bring these different lines of research together, we can build on a small, but growing number of contributions that have started to embrace this goal. The main issue in this emerging literature is the analysis of the radical right's socio-economic policy positions more broadly conceived. In short, the socio-economic positions of PRRPs have been considered either 'blurred' (Rovny 2013; Rovny and Polk 2020), centrist (De Lange 2007; Mudde 2007) or, more recently, leftist (Afonso and Rennwald 2018; Eger and Valdez 2015; Hartevelt 2016; Michel and Lefkofridi 2017). While these studies are in many ways useful first steps, their inconclusive results suggest that the traditional left-right distinction is not necessarily an adequate conceptual apparatus to analyse the socio-economic agenda of the radical right. As PRRPs display both right-wing and left-wing elements in their economic platforms, they often defy the conventional left-right cleavage in favour of producerist distinctions between hard-working 'makers' against self-serving 'takers' (Rathgeb 2021; see also Abts *et al.* 2021) or sovereignist economic appeals to 'take back control' against foreign interventions of all sorts (Mazzoleni and Ivaldi 2020).

In the area of welfare state reforms, Afonso (2015) and Röth et al. (2018) have been pioneering in analysing the influence of the radical right on social policy making. They find that PRRPs indeed defend the generosity of welfare benefits vis-à-vis the centre-right when in government, but are opposed to high levels of economic regulation at the same time. In a similar vein, Pingerra (2020) and Chueri (2020) show that PRRPs are particularly supportive of generous public pensions. Taken together, these results suggest that PRRPs can be both ‘pro-welfare’ (i.e. left-wing) as well as ‘anti-regulation’ (i.e. right-wing), which buttresses the view that the radical right’s socio-economic policies do not necessarily map onto the traditional left-right distinction in consistent ways. The contributions in this special issue will continue along the lines of these pioneering contributions by pursuing a fine-grained conceptualisation of the multi-dimensional character of welfare state politics and policy choices, as we will outline in detail below.

Bridging literatures in the study of the radical right and the welfare state: overview of the special issue contributions

We believe that the mutual neglect between party politics and voting behaviour research on the one hand, and comparative political economy and welfare state research on the other, has been unfortunate because both lines of research can benefit from each other’s insights in the study of the populist radical right and the welfare state. In the following, we highlight a few concrete issues, where this exchange would be particularly fruitful from our perspective.

First, empirical studies on party competition, vote choice, and partisan policy influence would benefit from a *more complex and differentiated understanding of the welfare state*. The conventional foci on ‘welfare generosity’ and ‘economic redistribution’ are too crude to capture how different dimensions of the welfare state affect voting behaviour at the micro level as well as the dynamics of party competition and policy making at the macro level. We thereby draw on comparative political economy and welfare state research to illuminate the relationship between the radical right and the welfare state in multi-dimensional terms (Beramendi *et al.* 2015; Bonoli 2010; Garritzmann *et al.* 2017; Häusermann 2012; Hemerijck 2018). More specifically, and building on this literature, the contributions by Busemeyer *et al.* (2021) and Enggist and Pingerra (2021) in this special issue distinguish between social transfers and other forms of compensatory social spending (i.e. old-age pensions), social investments and human capital formation (i.e. childcare, education) as well as ‘workfare’ (i.e. tight obligations in return for the receipt of social

transfers). In this way, these articles nuance and qualify existing studies that consider PRRPs as ‘blurry’ on the socio-economic dimension (Rovny and Polk 2020) or ‘pro-welfare’ in social policy (Afonso and Rennwald 2018).

In this regard, the findings by Enggist and Pingerra (2021) on policy positions of PRRPs (the supply-side of electoral competition) have important implications that should be explored in further research. By distinguishing between social consumption and investment, they show that PRRPs are much more outspoken on the goals and principles that the welfare state should meet than the ‘position-blurring’ hypothesis suggests (Rovny 2013). These parties clearly emphasise traditional forms of social consumption (i.e. old-age pensions) while opposing social investments that are aimed at lifelong learning, education and gender equality, arguably in line with the policy preferences of lower-educated (male) labour market insiders. Hence, their contribution provides a fine-grained understanding of the radical right’s social policy stances by going beyond the conventional focus on ‘welfare generosity’. In short, PRRPs would rather have a transfer-oriented welfare state that downgrades those social investments on which new social risk groups rely to foster their labour market participation and reconciliation of work-family life. As a result, they are the main opponent to the recalibration of welfare states to the social demands of post-industrial labour markets.

These results at the supply-side are in line with the findings presented by Busemeyer *et al.* (2021) at the demand-side of voter preferences. Drawing on an original survey of public opinion on education and related social policies, they show that PRRP voters are not generally ‘pro-welfare’; they instead support what the authors call a *particularistic-authoritarian welfare state*, displaying moderate support only for ‘deserving’ benefit recipients (i.e. the elderly), while revealing strong support for a workfare approach and little support for social investment. The particularistic-authoritarian conception of the welfare state is particular to PRRP supporters and therefore different from the welfare state models supported by other partisan constituencies. Different from the supporters of centre-right parties, PRRP voters are more likely to support social transfers for ‘deserving’ social groups (e.g. the elderly). Different from the supporters of centre-left parties, they are much more likely to be opposed to social investment policies as well as to social transfers for ‘non-deserving’ social groups (e.g. the unemployed), but they are in favour of workfare policies. The article also shows how the policy demands of voters resonate with the authoritarian values that characterise the ideology of PRRPs. The function of the welfare state, in this view, is not only to protect against market and life-course risks, but also to ensure conformity with socio-cultural norms inherited from the past.

The benefits of adopting a multi-dimensional perspective on the welfare state are also illustrated when studying the welfare-related causes of the PRRP vote. Based on European Social Survey (ESS) and social policy datasets, Vlandas and Halikiopoulou (2021) show how different dimensions of the welfare state influence the vulnerability of voters to social risks, which in turn influences their likelihood to vote for the radical right. Their findings suggest that the rise of PRRPs is not merely a 'natural' result of secular trends like globalisation and de-industrialisation, but rather a lack of responsiveness on the part of the welfare state to social risks. More specifically, the effect of social risk exposure on radical right voting is contingent on the generosity of social policies targeting these particular social risks.

Adding to the previous articles, the contribution by Burgoon and Schakel (2021) shows that the presence of generous welfare arrangements may overall dampen an anti-globalisation backlash. Seen in this way, the welfare state not only puts constraints on the electoral fortunes of the radical right in mitigating economic uncertainties (Vlandas and Halikiopoulou, 2021); it may also moderate the anti-globalisation rhetoric in manifestoes that is part of the broader radical right's agenda. However, radical right parties share with radical left parties an opposition to European integration and immigration when they operate in generous welfare state contexts. They conclude from this finding that the radical right (and especially the radical left) mobilises on an anti-globalisation platform only when internationalism seems to put constraints on nationally anchored welfare rights.

Second, even when conceptualising party politics as a (re-)distributive struggle that is eventually rooted in material self-interest as is commonly done in a comparative political economy, empirical studies also need to take into account the *socio-culturally laden ideology of PRRPs* to understand their socio-economic consequences in policy making. In other words, when studying PRRPs, ideology may well matter more than in the case of traditional mainstream parties of the left and right. While the material self-interest of voters certainly remains important to understanding partisan policy demands, PRRPs derive their socio-economic policy demands, at least in part, from their nativist and authoritarian worldview. Thus, scholarship in party politics and voting behaviour can significantly help in understanding how the ideological values of PRRPs influences their social policy positions and choices in government (Akkerman 2015; Minkenberg 2002; Mudde 2007; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013; Rydgren 2005). As PRRPs emerged by mobilising on the nativist-authoritarian pole of the socio-cultural cleavage, their socio-economic policies cannot be derived from the left-right dimension exclusively. This recognition should thus inform the theorisation of the radical right's social policies.

The articles in this special issue show how ideological values inform the social policies of PRRPs. Ennser-Jedenastik (2021), for example, demonstrates how a pro-natalist ideology (based on its nativism) with a traditional perspective on gender roles (based on its authoritarianism) can help understand the radical right's impact on family policy. Similar to the contributions described above, he distinguishes between social consumption efforts geared to uphold male breadwinner legacies (child benefits) versus social investments intended to facilitate greater gender equality (childcare). Whereas partisan effects on expenditure levels are limited (like in analyses of 'welfare generosity'), PRRPs in government are associated with larger differences between expenditures on family allowances and childcare expenditures, which contributes to restoring the 'traditional' division of care work between men (full-time work) and women (part-time work and child rearing).

In a similar vein, Meardi and Guardiancich (2021) show in their case study comparison of Italy and Poland how the radical right expands monetary family support to reinvigorate the relevance of the (traditional) family in welfare provision, which is in line with both countries' strong Catholic legacies. Despite fiscal constraints, the Italian *Lega* and the Polish *PiS* used their government responsibility to expand monetary family support as well as pension entitlements for the 'hard-working' (male) core workforces, i.e. labour market insiders with a long history of pension contributions. By contrast, the social protection of labour market outsiders and especially social investments in the interest of new social risk groups featured much less prominently in their agendas (consistent with Enggist and Pingerra 2021 and Busemeyer *et al.* 2021 described above). Although both parties operated in very different country contexts, they displayed similar policy priorities when in office, which underscores the influence of similar cultural values, but also the material interests of disadvantaged regions becoming receptive to the radical right (Southern voters for *Lega*, rural previously non-voters in Poland).

The mobilising capacity of the radical right's ideology is also on display when looking at how centre-right parties respond to it. Drawing on a qualitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis, Donoghue and Kuisma (2021) highlight how the electoral challenge from the radical right UKIP empowered the more radical factions within the Conservative Party to embrace welfare chauvinist discourses in the wake of the Brexit referendum. In line with the 'Leave campaign', the Conservatives invoked social citizenship to delegitimise EU institutions in an effort to redraw the boundaries of welfare deservingness along ethno-national lines. Seen in this way, the Brexit outcome is a textbook example of the mainstreaming of the radical right's ideology of nativism – and thus welfare chauvinism – in the domain of social policy.

The insights of this special issue might animate research at the intersection of party politics, voting behaviour and comparative welfare state scholarship to study the future reform trajectories of the welfare state, in particular in light of the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic. Even though, of course, PRRPs have been on the ascent before, the refugee crisis of the mid-2010s has significantly boosted electoral support for them across many countries. Potentially, the salience of migration as a contentious political issue is and will be superseded by concerns about health care and the sustainability of the welfare state more generally. Thus, after having been pushed to the margins of party competition for some time, the welfare state may yet recapture its traditional place at the top of the political agenda (even if PRRPs are likely to reframe the repercussions of the crisis in a ‘natives first’ fashion). This has important implications for the electoral fate of PRRPs, which, however, need to be further explored. Combining the theoretical and methodological toolkit of the two traditions of scholarship discussed above would significantly help in this endeavour.

Conclusions and avenues of future research

Our key argument in this brief review is that future research needs to build more explicitly on both party politics and voting behaviour scholarship on the one hand, and comparative political economy and welfare state research on the other, when studying the nexus between partisanship and the welfare state. The contributions to this special issue thus provide illustrative examples of how to overcome the boundaries between these two strands of literature in the case of populist radical right parties.

What are the main takeaway points of this special issue? When it comes to the welfare-related *consequences* of the populist radical right, a crucial insight is that their voters do not support a leftist ‘pro-welfare’ response (Busemeyer *et al.* 2021), which is also mirrored in PRRPs’ policy positions in party manifestos and policy choices when in government (Enggist and Pingerra, 2021; Ennsner-Jedenastik, 2021; Meardi and Guardiancich, 2021). The strong role of ‘deservingness’ conceptions implies a more particularistic-authoritarian approach to social policy (Busemeyer *et al.* 2021), which caters to ‘hard-working’ people with long contribution records in social insurance (e.g. the elderly and labour market insiders), at the expense of new social risk groups (e.g. women, low-skilled and the young) and people with precarious attachments to the labour market (e.g. the unemployed and social assistance claimants). The contributions in our special issue add a new perspective to scholarship on this issue by adopting a multi-dimensional perspective on the welfare state, which

reveals that the recent literature that ascribes ‘pro-welfare’ positions to the radical right is misleading and too simplified. PRRPs and their supporters are critically opposed to social investment policies, even though these policies are broadly supported among the population in general. At the same time, in line with the authoritarian aspect of the radical right’s ideology, they support workfare policies, i.e. a punitive disposition to those out of work. Within the domain of social transfers, the pro-welfare orientation of the radical right is essentially restricted to pro-elderly spending (i.e. pensions, health care) (Busemeyer *et al.* 2021; Enggist and Pingerra, 2021) and/or monetary family support along the lines of the male breadwinner model inherited from the industrial past (Ennser-Jedenastik, 2021; Meardi and Guardiancich, 2021).

When it comes to the welfare-related *causes* of the radical right, our second key takeaway point is on how the welfare state shapes the electoral fortunes of the radical right and its position on globalisation. As the welfare state mitigates social risks, it also moderates the impact of economic insecurity on support for the radical right (Vlandas and Halikiopoulou, 2021). In addition, generous welfare states also dampen the anti-globalisation backlash among radical right parties (Burgoon and Schakel, 2021). Both of these effects have important implications for party competition. Our third takeaway point is therefore that the impact of the radical right on the welfare state may also work out indirectly through co-optation strategies by centre-right parties. The Brexit referendum is an insightful case of how the radical right’s agenda can strengthen welfare chauvinist positions and discourses among centre-right parties (Donoghue and Kuisma, 2021).

This special issue generates *avenues of future research* on the study of the radical right and the welfare state. Coming back to the two overarching research questions we identified in the introduction to this article, we want to highlight the following issues that are, in our view, worth exploring further. Regarding *the consequences of PRRPs ascent for the welfare state*, a crucial question remains whether there is a particular type of welfare state that is promoted and supported by PRRPs or whether their social policy positions and preferences are simply (more or less) extreme versions of those of mainstream left- and right-wing parties. The articles in this special issue have started to explore this question and provided evidence to help in the belief that PRRPs indeed support a particular kind of welfare state that is qualitatively different from those of other parties, as this model is deeply rooted in the ideology of these parties. Thus, future research should explore whether indeed a common conception of the welfare state exists within the party family of PRRPs and to what extent the particular social policy preferences of PRRPs have actually affected and mediated the social policy positions of mainstream parties.

A second issue for future research relates to the *impact of welfare state institutions and policies on electoral support for PRRPs*. Again, this special issue has started to explore this issue further, but there are still a number of open questions. For instance, on the one hand, a generous welfare state can mitigate labour market and other social risks, thereby reducing the economic grievances that might fuel support for PRRPs. On the other hand, a more generous welfare state also implies a higher degree of accessibility to welfare state services and benefits, which could in turn raise the sensitivity of voters to the issue of welfare state sustainability and vulnerability in the face of increasing demands from the citizenry (and potentially migrants). In a post-pandemic world of heightened fiscal austerity, public support for a more access-restricted (nativist) conception of the welfare state might therefore increase, in particular in those welfare states that are (or have been) particularly generous and universalistic in this regard. A further, but related issue – discussed for instance by Kurer (2020) with respect to semi-skilled routine workers – is to what extent welfare state policies can actually address the real or perceived grievances that drive (lower) middle class citizens to turn to PRRPs. If this is more about perceived status decline (i.e. identity politics) rather than real economic hardship (as suggested by Kurer (2020) as well as Burgoon *et al.* (2019)), the dampening effect of social policy expansion may be limited. This is however partly at odds with the findings of Vlandas and Halikiopoulou (2021) who do find a dampening effect of social policies. Hence, this issue needs further exploration in research.

Third, beyond research on the welfare-related causes and consequences, the findings of this special issue may also stimulate new avenues of study in *party competition*. An important assumption in the literature is that the electoral success of PRRPs rests on a high issue salience of immigration relative to welfare (Afonso and Rennwald 2018). Yet, as PRRPs have become less ambiguous on their social policy priorities over time, it might be questionable whether this is still the case. For example, centre-left parties still have to balance between the social protection demands of blue-collar workers and the social investment demands of the new middle class (Häusermann 2018), whereas the voter demands and social policy platforms of PRRPs seem to have become more consistent over time. Future research could therefore investigate whether the traditional socio-economic split inside the electoral support base of PRRPs – between the market-liberal petty bourgeoisie and the more protectionist-minded working-class (see e.g. Ivarsflaten 2005) – has become less acute over time. This could explain why PRRPs continue to enjoy relatively high levels of support even in times when economic and distributive issues are becoming more prominent again on the political agenda (Hernández and Kriesi 2016). In a similar vein, it could be

explored whether the ‘proletarianisation’ of PRRPs is still exclusively based on an opposition to immigration or whether the particularistic-authoritarian welfare state model of PRRPs additionally attracts their vote choice.

Finally, the distinct social policy profile of PRRPs calls for further research on the *coalitional politics* of welfare policy making, given the radical right’s growing participation in governments. On the one hand, PRRPs might support the political left in expanding the generosity of public pensions and other areas of social protection for ‘hard-working’ (and thus deserving) social groups (e.g. elderly care). However, as public pensions are hard to retrench for electoral reasons in the wake of demographic ageing for any party, it could be argued that the radical right stands in conflict with the left not only on immigration, but also more generally on social policy. On the other hand, PRRPs might side with conservative parties in defending ‘male breadwinner’ legacies in family policy and tightening the conditions of benefit receipt for the unemployed (‘workfare’) while opposing social investment initiatives. They may also find common ground in attacks on the institutional power resources of trade unions, which would facilitate the economic right-wing agenda of the centre-right (and affiliated employer associations) and undermine the extra-parliamentary support base of the radical right’s main competitor for the blue-collar working-class vote, i.e. the centre-left (Rathgeb and Klitgaard, 2021). Seen in this way, the radical right’s dilemma of betraying either voters (by accepting welfare cuts) or their centre-right coalition partner (by opposing welfare cuts) – as identified by Afonso (2015) – might thus be more exclusively restricted to the area of public pensions. Once centre-right parties come to support (or at least accept) generous public pensions, PRRPs might well be a more reliable coalition partner for right-wing governments than in the past. This is especially the case as PRRPs become more mainstreamed in party competition as well as more experienced in governing. It therefore seems likely that the populist radical right is there to stay even as economic and distributive issues rise on the political agenda again.

Notes

1. In this special issue, we follow Mudde’s (2007) definition of populist radical right parties, according to which these parties combine nativism, authoritarianism and populism in their ideology. However, other terminology used throughout this special issue refers to the same group of parties (e.g. ‘far-right’ by Vlandas and Halikiopoulou, 2021).
2. Classification of parties as ‘populist radical right’ is based on Mudde (2015: 298–301); own updates for the period from 2015 to 2019. We included the following parties: the Austrian FPÖ/BZÖ, the Flemish FN/VB, the

German AfD, the Finnish PS, the Greek EL/LAOS, the Bulgarian Attack, the Croatia HSP, the Danish DFP, the French FN/RN, the Hungarian Fidesz & Jobbik, the Dutch PVV, the Italian LN/Lega, the Polish LPR & PiS, the Norwegian FrP, the Romanian PRM, the Russian LDPR, the Serbian SNS/SRS, the Slovakian SNS, the Swedish SD, the Swiss SVP, the Spanish Vox, and the UK's UKIP.

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